Get the On Parenting Newsletter

Free twice-weekly updates delivered just for you.

On Parenting

Are you holding your own daughter back? Here are 5 ways to raise girls to be leaders.

By Amy Joyce  July 28 at 1:00 AM

Think you’re raising your daughter to be a strong leader? Look more closely: You, and the people around her, may unwittingly be doing just the opposite.

Teen boys, teen girls, and, yes, even parents have biases against girls and women as leaders, new research from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and its Making Caring Common project found.

Richard Weissbourd, a Harvard psychologist who runs the Making Caring Common project, said he was “surprised by the extent of it ... how gendered both the boys’ and the girls’ responses were.”

Weissbourd decided to look at bias as part of the larger goal of helping children learn to be kind. “We were concerned that biases get in the way of people caring about and respecting other people, so our initial study was just looking at biases,” he said. “And one of the striking findings that emerged was gender bias.”

[Are you raising nice kids? A Harvard psychologist gives 5 ways to raise them to be kind]

The research found that 23 percent of girls and 40 percent of boys preferred male political leaders instead of female, while only 8 percent of girls and 4 percent of boys preferred female political leaders. Similarly, 36 percent of boys preferred male business leaders to female. (There was no significant difference between girls’ preference for male versus female business leaders.)

On the school-age level, students were least likely to support granting more power to student councils if white girls were in charge and most likely when white boys were.

That’s right. Even mothers and girls were more likely to favor giving power to student councils led by boys rather than by girls. Weissbourd’s report cited a 2013 Gallup poll found that 35 percent of all respondents would prefer to
have a male boss while only 23 percent of respondents would prefer to have a female boss. The preference for male bosses was even stronger among female respondents.

So what are we teaching our kids? The same things that may be holding women back today. The data suggest that awareness of gender discrimination may be related to unconscious bias against female leaders, and that this may also be true for racial bias.

Bias “can be a powerful — and invisible — barrier to teen girls’ leadership,” Weissbourd said. “Yet parents and teachers can do a great deal to stem these biases and help children manage them.” [Read the full report here.] Which would mean, yes, more future leaders who are women.

So what can we do? Weissbourd and Luba Falk Feigenberg, partnerships manager at MCC, came up with five ways for parents to prevent gender bias:

1. Check your own biases

*Why?* We all carry biases that are based on gender; throughout our lives we receive daily messages about what is expected of males and females. These biases become ingrained, and it’s often impossible to completely get rid of them. But if we can be more aware of our biases, we have a better chance of counteracting them.

*How?* Take a hard look at how biases might be affecting your attitudes or actions. Be mindful that the relationships, language and behaviors that come naturally to you may express bias. Think about what conclusions you jump to about what boys or girls should dress like, act like, think about and feel.

*Try this:*

- *Practice counteracting stereotypes.* Exposing our brains to images that contradict stereotypes can actually decrease our implicit, unconscious biases. Find images that don’t fit traditional gender stereotypes — women doing construction work or men in care-taking roles — and post them in places you view often at home or at work.

- *Watch your language.* Our language sends messages about our expectations based on gender. When we comment on how pretty girls look or how strong boys are, for example, we send messages about our expectations for kids based on their gender. Consider using words like “firefighter” instead of “fireman,” for example and watch out for statements that start with “all girls” or “all boys.”
• *Check in with a friend or family member.* Because we all are blind to some of our biases, we need feedback. Talk to close friends and family members about your own gender biases that you might be unaware of. Ask kids to give you feedback if you are modeling stereotypes or expressing bias. Modeling this openness and being willing to admit bias sends a powerful message to kids. It can be tough to receive this kind of feedback, but it’s a key part of responsible, moral parenting.

2. Engage your kids in making your home a bias-free zone

*Why?* Beginning at a very young age, kids notice differences between girls and boys that can develop into narrow understandings of gender. Cultivate family practices that widen kids’ sense of gender roles and alert them to bias.

*How?* Develop routines and habits in your family, with input from your kids, that help to counteract and prevent stereotypes. Build strong, trusting relationships with your children so it’s easier for them to ask you uncomfortable questions. When kids ask about differences, let them know that you appreciate the question, and answer with straightforward, honest language.

*Try this:*

• *Mix it up.* Proactively start conversations with your kids about how responsibilities get divvied up in your family. Talk about what is fair and balanced, rather than making assumptions about who does what based on gender. Be willing to model behavior that doesn’t fit gender stereotypes.

• *Hold one another accountable.* Periodically ask your kids whether they think your family practices are gender-biased. Are there different expectations of females and males in the family? If so, why? Then brainstorm solutions with them.

• *Tell your story.* Share with your kids examples of times when you’ve experienced bias because of your gender. Talk to them about times you’ve felt you’ve been treated unfairly or times that you’ve taken a stand against bias and injustice. Sharing your stories opens the door for them to share theirs.

• *Expand their horizons.* Provide your kids with books, games, TV shows, movies and art that show people from diverse backgrounds demonstrating non-traditional
gender roles. Expose boys and girls to a variety of activities. Don’t just assume that boys will like sports and girls will like ballet. Ask girls to imagine themselves as senators, sports team managers and business leaders and ask boys to imagine themselves as child care directors and dance choreographers. Facilitate children interacting with mixed gender groups and developing cross-gender friendships.

3. Help kids kick stereotypes to the curb

*Why?* Kids are often unaware of the gender biases and stereotypes they confront every day. They need to learn from the adults in their lives how to recognize bias in themselves and others, how to talk constructively to others about biases, and how to avoid being influenced by stereotypes.

*How?* Be prepared to explain to kids why bias is harmful, in ways that they can understand, and give kids strategies for responding to biases and stereotypes that are appropriate for their developmental stage.

**Try this:**

- *Ask kids what they think.* Kids are excellent at finding unfair images of themselves and others. Create a list together of gender stereotypes you both see or hear. Talk to them about how these stereotypes make them feel. Make the connection clear: “That commercial shows girls not caring about school as much as about how they look. That doesn’t seem fair.”

- *Help kids be a first responder.* Brainstorm with kids strategies for responding to stereotypes they encounter in their daily interactions. Talk together about the words they can use to speak up, and how those words might be different when talking to a friend or a stranger or a teacher, for example. Practice different responses and conduct role plays that help children find the right words. Help kids identify allies who could help when they are in a difficult interaction.

- *Question their lingo.* When you hear kids use terms to describe boys or girls that reflect biases, ask them to consider what the words mean and what messages these words might send.

4. Don’t just let “boys be boys.”
Why? Too often boys’ demeaning stereotypes and remarks about girls go unchecked. Often both adults’ and kids’ peers don’t know how to intervene when boys make remarks about girls and often they fear being written off or ridiculed. Yet excusing these behaviors as “boys being boys” sends them the message that those behaviors are okay.

How? Take time to consider how to intervene when boys are demeaning to girls, and step in immediately if you observe or hear these behaviors.

Try this:

- *Talk about real honor and strength.* Point out to boys the false bravado in demeaning girls and the real courage and strength in defying one’s peers when they devalue girls in general or divide girls into “good girls” and “bad girls.” Talk about commonly used, denigrating words to describe girls and why they’re offensive, even when they’re used “just as a joke.” Brainstorm strategies with boys for talking to their peers about this denigration that won’t cause them to be ridiculed or spurned.

- *Allow boys to express their full selves.* Encourage them to talk about vulnerabilities and worries, and appreciate them when they do. Encourage and recognize their expressions of empathy, especially for girls and others who are different from them.

- *Teach boys to value and stand up for girls and women.* Help boys understand their responsibility in counteracting gender bias and stereotypes. Reinforce that being an ally to girls and women means not just avoiding demeaning girls but also speaking up when others do.

5. **Build girls’ leadership skills and self-confidence**

Why? Too many girls are dealing with biases about their leadership capacity. Perhaps the best way for girls to counteract their negative images about their own and other girls’ leadership capacity is for them to experience leadership.

How? Expose girls to examples of leadership and help them develop the skills and confidence they need to become leaders in a wide variety of fields. Too often girls avoid leadership because they don’t feel confident in skills such as public speaking or because they fear their peers will disapprove. Many girls fear appearing bossy.

Try this:
• **Connect girls to leadership opportunities that are meaningful to them.** Discuss with girls many types of leadership and explore with them how their interests and passions align with these different types. Show them images of girls and women in a range of leadership positions, such as the lead scientist in the recent Pluto mission.

• **Help girls develop specific leadership skills.** Give girls chances to practice public speaking, to participate in decision-making processes, to work in teams and to give and receive feedback. Invite them to practice these skills in decisions your family makes, or encourage them to take action on problems they’re concerned about in their schools and communities.

• **Talk to girls about their fears.** Start conversations with girls about the things they feel hold them back from leadership. Model for them that it’s okay to feel nervous or worried about how they’ll be perceived or the reactions they may get when in leadership roles. Explore with girls various strategies for dealing with disapproval and criticism. Consider with girls how they might engage peers as supporters and allies when they face disapproval.

• **Encourage girls to lead in collaboration with diverse groups of girls.** Collaboration and teamwork are essential skills for leadership in today’s workplace, helping to develop social awareness, problem-solving abilities, perspective-taking and other key skills. And working in racial and economically diverse groups can enrich girls’ understandings of different cultures, expose girls to a wide range of leadership styles and abilities, and enable girls to draw on various kinds of cultural wisdom about leadership.

*Amy Joyce is the editor of On Parenting. You can see more of our essays at washingtonpost.com/onparenting, on Facebook, and follow us on Twitter @OnParenting.*

*You might also be interested in:*

Little girls don’t need to be told they’re beautiful

What having twins taught me about gender stereotypes

My husband does the laundry, and he should
Amy Joyce is the editor and a writer for On Parenting.